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How Consumer Behavior in the 1930's-1940's Differed from Today

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Interview at least one grandparent. Ask about life as consumer when he/she was your age. Also ask him/her about their perceptions of your current life as a consumer and what he/she would enjoy most.

Over the years, consumer behavior has undergone a major evolution in terms of how people buy their products and what influences them. What was once limited by word of mouth and limited availability has now exploded into a major component of everyday life. In order to get more info on what consumer life was like before now, I conducted an interview with my grandmother, Mary Jane Krusinski, to see what consumer life was back in her time as well as her perceptions of consumer life today. However, the answers she gave may surprise some as her life as a consumer was different in many ways. The major ways consumer life differed in her day were acquisition, cost/benefits analysis, relationship marketing, needs and wants, marketing techniques used by companies, and disposition of products.

In my grandmother's time, acquisition, or the process of purchasing products, was quite different from how it is today. Ms. Krusinski explained that back in the 1930's and 1940's, people did not value what the most recent fashion was as much as the quality of the product itself. Back in those days, according to her, "people cared more about whether or not the product was well made and whether it would last" (Krusinski, 2019). This meant that quality was important in those days as customers wanted items that were durable and had longevity as items that fulfilled a utilitarian, or functional, need such as food or gas were rationed back then. This shows how the environment affected what people valued most from their products and what the potential benefits were. Even more so, acquiring products was different back then as well. Some business such as farms could not deliver their products to stores in those days as their items were not as widely available. Because of this, "items such as vegetables and milk were sold and delivered door-to-door" (Krusinski, 2019). This, in turn, made it slightly less convenient for consumers to purchase food items as people could not pick up a bottle of milk or a vegetable and see if it is still good before purchasing it. Because advertisers on TV or internet did not have a

strong influence on customers back in that time, according to my grandmother, “word of mouth influenced people the most” (Krusinski, 2019). This type of influence relies on people telling others about the quality of the product itself, an early form of customer testimonial. If the product was good, they would be influenced to purchase it. If not, they would find another better product. This also shows how other consumers can also be a form of marketing in itself in the acquisition process.

After discussing value in Ms. Krusinski’s day, a look was also taken at how acquisition works today. Unlike how consumer life was back during the 1930’s and 1940’s, people do not value quality from their products as much as they did back then. Instead, advertisers “appeal to the latest trends” (Krusinski, 2019). In other words, people are more concerned with satisfying a need for belongingness or prestige and advertisers, as a result, appeal to these sensibilities and use emotional effect in their advertising. The value of products to consumers has also changed dramatically in tastes. With the influx of advertising, people are now also influenced when ads remind consumers of personal experiences or problems they may have. Therefore, the products will suit their needs as well as personal enjoyment. Also, convenience, which Ms. Krusinski enjoys most, is something more valued today in the acquisition process (Krusinski, 2019). For example, the proliferation of business-to consumer ecommerce has allowed people to shop online without having to leave their homes. This allows companies to appeal to consumers’ need for convenience and motivate them to use the most convenient option. This also makes it less stressful for consumers who do not want to go out to a store.

Another way consumer behavior differed between Ms. Krusinski’s day and now is how people evaluated the price that people are willing to pay for a product as well as benefits compared to their alternatives. This stage of consumption was known as cost/benefits analysis. In

the late 1930's and early 1940's, in which she lived, the Second World War was a major event that was occurring that affected the United States in a big way. At this time, according to her, "people did not have much money to spend on the items they needed, and items had much more limited availability back then" (Krusinski, 2019). This caused consumers to evaluate multiple products on the basis of their costs and benefits and compare these to alternatives. Also, she said during that time, people had coupon books that they could use to buy products like food, which was being rationed at the time (Krusinski, 2019). However, there were a limited amount of these. This suggests that people had to be more careful about which products to use these coupon books on and evaluate the costs and benefits of alternatives or else they would use them all up and they could no longer purchase anything. This made cost/benefits analysis more difficult and increased functional and monetary risk for many.

Nowadays, the cost/benefits valuation is very similar to how it was back then. In my interview, my grandmother stated that "people still care very much about price" (Krusinski, 2019), meaning that cost/benefit analysis is still relevant today. However, with so many different stores carrying the same type of item, cost/benefit analysis now applies not only to different products, but to different stores as well. This means that price is even more of an influence now than it was back then. For example, Ms. Krusinski stated that "one item would be \$10 in one store and \$8 in another" (2019), urging customers to believe that lower costs lead to more benefits. Also, some stores now have price check options. These options allow people who are in a certain store to get the same item in one store for a cheaper price that they would pay at another store if the offer is valid. Programs like this have made it somewhat easier to get lower prices on items that people may otherwise have to check other stores to find while still getting the best benefits.

Another way these two periods in time differed in terms of consumer behavior was the needs, defined as “something people must have to achieve a goal” (Solomon, 2017) and wants, defined as “specific manifestations of a need that personal and cultural factors determine” (Solomon, 2017) of consumers in those days as well as the types of stores that people wanted to go to most. The needs of customers back in those days were a mix of utilitarian and hedonic needs. This is important as it shows how consumer behavior back then was influenced less by advertising and more by the world around them. Because of numerous problems going on during the 1940’s, many items that suited physiological and utilitarian needs had been rationed by the U.S. government. One of the most notable of these items was gasoline, which was vital for cars to travel around. This, in turn, motivated people to go to the stores closest to them to acquire the items they had desired the most (Krusinski, 2019), a utilitarian need for convenience caused by these rations. Even more so, the aforementioned coupon books made it more difficult to satisfy the utilitarian need for hunger due to their limitations. Coinciding with this, the lack of money during those days also fueled the utilitarian need for cost savings (Krusinski, 2019). In terms of wants, the products that positioned themselves as lower in cost typically included items such as clothing, which were also viewed as satisfying a utilitarian need rather than hedonic ones like belongingness like today (Krusinski, 2019). Also, in those times, people needed entertainment and pleasure to help them through these hard times as numerous problems were going on, a form of hedonic need. Because of this, radio was a major want in those days as many programs were broadcast through this medium. However, Ms. Krusinski stated that television had also been invented at this time (2019). Despite this, Ms. Krusinski said the decision between television and radio was always towards radio due to television being a new innovation at the time and thus

higher in price (2019). This is perceived as an example of how the environment can also affect the wants of a consumer as they are limited by how much they could spend.

In the present day however, things have changed in regard to the needs and wants of customers. Now, people have the desire to fulfill hedonic needs such as pleasure. One example is that TVs themselves have evolved over time and are now less expensive and available in different sizes and have different features such as streaming and internet access, rendering radio obsolete. However, some customers may not want all of these features and instead go with the one with the lowest price as explained before, showing how utilitarian needs still come into play. Another way wants have changed is products people will buy. As stated by Ms. Krusinski, people are now more inclined to buy designer apparel, a want meant to satisfy a need for belongingness or to show prestige (2019). This also shows how people value giving themselves meaning in the present day.

Not only were the products positioned differently back in the 1940's, but customer relationships as well as the type of marketing that was predominant back then were different too. In the 1930's and 1940's, from Ms. Krusinski's perspective, stores needed to build long term relationships with their customers, a vital part in helping a business succeed. The biggest touch point, or interaction with the customer, was the way customers were expected to be treated. In other words, building customer relationships had a more relational focus emphasizing quality service rather than special offers like stores do now. According to my grandmother, "customers were expected to be treated with courtesy" (Krusinski, 2019) by employees whenever they visit a store, so that they may return for many years to come. If an employee showed this level of kindness, this would influence the customer to return to the store. As a result, a customer will have developed a good relationship with the store, showing how service in itself can be a great

form of relationship marketing. Also, stores themselves differed back then too. Because of the rations going on and many items being in high demand, some stores were large in size and carried a wider variety of goods, appliances, and other household goods to accommodate the large amount of consumers and their needs (Krusinski, 2019). This was a form of undifferentiated marketing, where companies try to appeal to all market segments. This way, people would be able to find all of the goods they wanted in one place. However, these larger stores would not carry specific items and stores like these were not as common in those days. Because of this, niche marketing, where stores focus on only one product and market segment, was more widespread and used by smaller family-owned stores, which were more prominent. To find specific items, people sometimes visited smaller stores specializing in a specific type of item such as dresses or men's clothing. This way, people looking for one specific type of item would know where to go to get it. These smaller family owned stores are a perfect example of niche marketing because many of them focused on only one type of product.

In the present day however, the way stores influence customers to buy products has changed as well. Unlike the small local stores of those days, according to my grandmother, stores are now consolidated into large shopping centers known as malls. Because of their nature, malls entice people to buy large amounts of items by consolidating numerous stores, mainly chains, into one place (Krusinski, 2019). This way, people are motivated to stay in one place where they can find everything they need rather than travel to numerous different places to find them, showing how undifferentiated marketing has become more widespread and popular among many companies, leading to the rise of low-cost retailers such as Walmart and Target. It is also another example of how convenience has become an important value for consumers as well. However, the process of maintaining a positive customer relationship is much different than in the past. Presently,

according to Ms. Krusinski, building relationships, as well as advertising in general, is “based on TV advertising, newspaper ads, and most importantly the internet” (Krusinski, 2019). The last one of these is especially important as marketers can now interact with consumers on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, giving them details about the latest offers they have.

Disposition of products is another way that these two eras were different. Back in the 1930’s and 1940’s, disposition, the process of finding other uses for products that people no longer use, was prominent. According to Ms. Krusinski, “a great deal of daily food supply used vegetables from [her] garden” (Krusinski, 2019), showing how disposition back then served a utilitarian need to satisfy hunger. This process allowed customers to fulfill their needs without having to pay for food. Also, for meat, people created farms where people raised animals such as chickens and rabbits and later cooked them themselves. By doing this, people have been shown to find new uses for items they owned and satisfy their needs.

Disposition is much different now as it was back in those days. Presently, when people no longer use an item, rather than find another use for it, they can sell it to someone else through auction sites like eBay. Also, people also take environmental concerns into account as they also recycle used items rather than throw them away. This way, people seem to be more conscientious of the world around them. Also, disposing of gardens and animals is not as widespread now. According to Ms. Krusinski, “food is available pre-cooked rather than made through basic cooking” (2019). Due to this widespread availability, people no longer have to worry about causing harm to the environment or killing animals. This also hints that people now either sell their animals or gardens or let them live their useful life.

The 1930's-1940's and the present day differed much from one another. First, acquiring products was different and customers had different values back then such as quality. Next, cost and benefits played an important role due to how rations were in effect. Also, relationship marketing was different as good service took importance over advertising and niche marketing was more common with smaller stores being more prominent. Lastly, disposition was more widespread as people used the environment around them to grow their own food. With all of this in mind, it is easy to see why my grandmother's time was different from the present day in terms of consumer behavior.

References

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